

Interview with Vietnam veteran corpsman Thomas Dimitry, Washington, D.C., conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, Bethesda, Maryland, 20 May 1994.

How did you come to join the Navy?

After my dad passed away--well, even before that, I was going to go back to school because the GI Bill was instituted, and I had written to either ABC--it was one of the networks, and I wanted to hump cameras. I volunteered to be a camera humper, to go to Vietnam. I just wanted to see what was going on. Then I thought about the Peace Corps. Then when my dad passed away, I was weighing a decision of going back to school or to go in the Peace Corps. That ruled the Peace Corps out.

I had met, in the bar I used to run, a Green Beret, and Robbie was trying to get me to go into the Army. I knew I couldn't pass the physical because my eyes were real bad, so I knew I could never make an officer and I knew I'd never make Special Forces because I couldn't jump because I couldn't pass the eye exam to get in.

So I thought a long time and then I decided--I found out that there was a shortage of medics. I didn't want to go into the regular Army because I just--I don't know why I didn't trust a regular unit. That's just something that I never would have felt comfortable with. So I found out that the Marines got their medics or corpsmen from the Navy, so I went to join the Navy and was offered E6 to go back in, in my old rate.

You had been in the Army?

I had been in the Air Force.

Tell me about that. When did you join the Air Force?

In '58. 1958. I got out of school in '57 and then I joined in '58, and then I got out in '62. I went back in '68.

What kind of job did you have in the Air Force?

Data processing. Computers. It was kind of on the cutting edge of all the equipment that was coming on line at the time. It was kind of like--what's the right word? The mass use of data processing, I guess, really at the time, that's what it was, at least in the military uses. Well, everything that was being automated, I guess is the best way to put it. Everything that was automated.

So you got out of the Air Force. How long was it before you decided to join up?

In the Navy?

Yes.

About six years after that. In 1968.

You joined the Navy because you thought you could be a medic?

No, that was the only reason.

You wanted to be a medic?

Yes.

You knew that if you were a medic you would be with the Marines, and you had a desire to be with the Marines?

Yes. Well, I had a desire to be with the infantry. I wanted to do something constructive, so that's what I did. In fact, I remember the recruiter because I joined in California. They thought I was really loony when they said, "We'll give you E6, you go back in your old rate" and I said, "Well, that's not what I want to do." "We've got a live one here, you know. You'd better grab him now before he changes his mind." [Laughter]

I had asked about jump school because I thought I could go recon, and that was something that was always when you get to your next duty station. In fact, I was supposed to get third class and go to Long Beach for a military refresher course, and that didn't work out. I got orders to go to San Diego, so I took a bus and went to San Diego and reported to go back to boot camp. [Laughter] I got there on a weekend and they didn't know what to do with me, so they let me go to the club, the E Club, and spent the weekend. I had a suit and everything on and a couple of other clothes with me. Then I went back and went all the way through boot camp again.

At San Diego?

Yes. [Laughter]

So you'd been through two boot camps?

Yes.

Where was your Air Force boot camp? Down in Texas?

Texas, yes. In Lackland.

So was mine.

That doesn't change.

No, it doesn't change. So you went through Navy boot camp at San Diego. How long was the boot camp? Six weeks? Eight weeks?

No, I went in July. When did I get out? I think it was September. I'm pretty sure. From there I went to corps school.

Great Lakes?

No. Right there in San Diego. I had volunteered again for FMSS. Prior to that, they asked where we'd like to serve, and I Vietnam. They said, "You can't. What hospital do you want to go to?" So I asked to go to Twentynine Palms Marine Corp base. I just wanted a real small place. So after corps school, I went to field medical school and then I went to Twentynine Palms.

When I got in there, the first thing I did was I volunteered to go to Vietnam. I had asked again about going to jump school, and they said, "You'll have wait. You can't volunteer until you've been here ninety days." I guess it was a policy that had been instituted.

This was '68?

'68. Yes.

What do you remember about corps school? What kinds of things were you learning there?

About the only thing I really remember, I was a guidon-bearer. Our Marine DIs--I remember one black guy. I can't remember his name. Real good people, but they used to always be chewing out the kids, if you will, because they said, "If that old man can keep the guidon out there, you people better keep up with him." [Laughter]

Were you singled out? You know, you had prior military experience. When you got out the Air Force, what were you, an E4 or E3?

Yes.

And here you are starting from scratch again in another outfit. How did the other guys treat you?

I don't think anyone knew, not in boot camp, anyway, except our DI. He knew. I mean, he had my records and stuff, and I guess I didn't look that old, so no one really knew. They figured maybe I was nineteen, twenty years old.

How old were you then?

Twenty-nine. Twenty-eight.

Twenty-eight? You were probably the oldest guy in boot camp.

I think so.

I remember when I was in boot camp, I was twenty-three, and I was the oldest guy in the barracks at twenty-three.

Yes, I think I was even older than our DI. He was about twenty-six, I guess.

So this is actually a fairly unusual story, really, in the scheme of things, to be starting out at age twenty-nine in boot camp.

I'm glad I did, though, because it got me in shape. As long as they didn't really bother me, I didn't mind it. I got all those partying years out of me, you know, had to sweat it all out again.

So you went through corp school and there you are at Twentynine Palms working in the hospital. Were you a ward corpsman there?

No. It was very, very small. Twelve beds. It was real small.

It was a clinic, really, wasn't it? It wasn't a full-fledged naval hospital then.

I don't know what it was at that time. I know we had a few beds in there because there was a retired Marine that I took care of for some time. He had a leg amputated. I can't remember, I think he ended up with two of them amputated and he passed on. But we had a few beds in there. Maybe twelve stays in my mind.

I volunteered to work in emergency treatment room in minor surgery to learn as much as I could there, and then we had a couple of corpsmen go down--one went down in EOD, so I

volunteered to go with EOD and drove the truck around and picked up explosives and things and learned--

So one of the corpsmen volunteered for EOD duty?

Well, he was assigned to EOD and he got sick. They didn't have anyone, so I said, "I'll go out with him," so I went out and drove a truck around, you know, picking up ordnance that wasn't exploded, pack it with C4 and set it off. We had "Willy Peter" stacked in there, too, so when it blew, you could tell it blew because you could see the "Willy Peter" go up.

"Willy Peter"? What's that?

White phosphorus. So I wanted to just get as much experience as I could over in a number of things.

So even as a corpsman, they gave you the duty doing EOD work? That's unusual too, isn't it?

I don't know. They didn't have anyone to go out and I said, "Hey, I'll go out", you know.

So how long did you do that?

I don't know, maybe five days, six days, something like that. Whatever it was till he got back. Then I went with a LAMPS outfit. I can't remember what--some kind of a missile something, and I went in the field with the LAMPS outfit, which was the desert, you know.

Would you then act as their corpsman if they got--

Yes. So I went out there in case of, you know, snake bites, or who knows what would happen out there. So after I came back in, I stayed in the emergency treatment room and minor surgery. I volunteered on my ninetieth day, I signed papers to volunteer, and you couldn't volunteer for anything except riverine forces. They said you'd go to riverine forces, but I figured, you know, I'd end up going with--well, I had met a guy in Phoenix, and I wanted helicopters, too, and I thought I could get that, but the form that I filled out said on it riverine forces or something else. It wasn't specific. It was just pretty general.

So once I signed that, I was pretty sure I'd get called pretty quickly, so I started working weekends and everything, you know, taking duty for the weekends so I could see as much as possible. I did quite a bit of suturing and some cutting. Then the next thing I knew, I got orders to go to Vietnam.

Had you learned at this point how to do chest tubes and IVs and any of that stuff? Or did you know just the basics?

I think I knew the basics then, but I did get to do some suturing, which was something I wanted to know and I wanted to do as much of it as I could before I went over there. So I sutured and I cut.

Had you volunteered? Because you mentioned earlier when you first joined up that you actually had a desire to go Vietnam. Was there any particular reason why you wanted to go at that time? You wanted to see some action or some excitement?

No, but if you're going to help someone, what the hell's the sense of helping in the States? To me that wasn't helping. It was just--

You thought your talent could be put to better use there than anywhere else? Your training.

Yes.

So you got orders, and where were the orders to?

Just to Vietnam.

Just go to Vietnam?

Well, I had an extend form once.

You knew that your one year would be over before--

Well, they did.

They knew that?

Yes.

Is it a four-year enlistment?

No, I was on a two-year enlistment, but I had already completed a year. August. So I didn't have a year to complete in Vietnam, so they had me extend four months.

To do your year?

Yes, to do a year in Vietnam, so I extended.

When you got your orders, were you assigned to a unit at that point?

No. I can't remember if it was FMF Vietnam. I don't remember exactly how they read. I know when I got there, I went to some kind of a clearing facility. I don't know, maybe I was the only corpsman there. I know my orders were just orders of one. Just me.

I don't mean to interrupt you, but you're at Twentynine Palms, your ninety days. You had to be there at least ninety days to volunteer. Had you been to Field Medical Service School?

Oh, yes.

You had been there? Camp Pendleton?

Yes.

So you'd been through that.

Yes.

Do you remember essentially what that was like, what FMF was like?

Well, a lot of humping. A lot of running. We had to draw blood in the dark, and it was raining so we didn't do that outside. We ended up doing it in the theater. I had an M.D. next to me when they decided to do that. But I guess then flashlights were allowed. I can't remember.

Who did you draw the blood from?

A doctor. An M.D.

You had to draw it from the M.D.?

Well, I can't remember--we broke out in some kind of a way, and the person that I happened to be saddled up with happened to be an M.D., so he drew my blood, and my veins are pretty promising. He got mine and he helped me to get his. It was a weird thing.

So you remember that very vividly?

Yes. I remember a lot of the classes and things. I just don't remember. I remember when we had combat simulation and retrieving patients. One of the kids in our class was a second-class, and I remember smacking him in the helmet one time because he wouldn't keep down. I had heard later he had gotten killed in Vietnam. It bothered the shit out of me. He was pretty tall. He must have been about 6'1" or so, and he just didn't seem to understand to stay low.

So you finished your field medical service training and then you actually had gone to Twentynine Palms and did your duty there?

Yes.

It sounded fairly interesting. It sounded like you got to do a little of everything.

Oh, yes. Yes. I liked it. I enjoyed it an awful lot.

Then you put in and you got your orders for Vietnam.

Yes.

I've talked to other veterans from Vietnam and they always remember something, and I don't know if you remember, getting on an airliner, usually getting some good chow, the stewardesses pretty nice.

Where? On the plane?

Yes. You went essentially on a commercial plane.

Yes.

It was from Travis. It was a chartered flight.

Yes.

It was either a 707 or a--well, they didn't have 747s yet. A 707 or whatever. You were just like going on vacation.

No, I don't think so.

What went through your mind? I mean, what did you feel?

I think we left there about four in the morning or something out of Travis, and I had khakis on. I was still wasted out of my gourd, still blitzed out of my mind. I got on the plane and I was looking around and I was wondering, you know, what was going to happen. Who's going to lose this? Who's going to come back this way, that way? Who is not going to come back? Looking around, checking to see if anyone had a wedding ring on, what they were

thinking about. I guess I was thinking more about, you know, what was going to be happening with the people that were around me more so than myself, you know.

When was that, do you remember? That was in late '68?

Mid-'69. August '69.

So a long flight. It must have been hours long. Did you stop in Hawaii on the way over?

We stopped in Hawaii, then we went to Okinawa. I don't remember if we got gear in Okinawa. I don't remember if we got uniforms in Okinawa or not. Then we went from--I can't remember. I must have had dungarees or something with me. I don't know.

You don't remember what kind of gear you took from California with you?

No. I had khakis, I know, and a set of greens. I don't remember when I got my jungles. Maybe it was when I got to Vietnam.

Did your orders tell you where you were supposed to report to? Was it not a unit, but a place?

Well, we all got off--we got to Danang, we were herded to like a big hangar or something, and we gave our orders to someone, and someone just said, you know, "The chief's going to be around," so he just told me to wait. The Marines were getting assigned different places, and I just sat there waiting, you know, until finally they just told me to go to get on that truck to go to some chopper pad.

I went to--I can't remember. It was either Ross or Baldy, and it was the wrong place and I stayed overnight or two nights on the one, and then they said, "No, you've been transferred or something to another unit." So then I went to another. I think it was on Ross, fire base Ross. Or, no, Baldy. And then they shipped me to Ross to meet my unit. I don't know in between if I had been sent to the wrong unit or if the unit they sent me to was relatively well staffed and the other place was understaffed and then I went--I'm not sure. I just know I went to one place and they said, "No, you're going to another place."

What do you remember about--you arrived at the airport at Danang, there was some kind of an airport there, or did you go to Saigon first?

No.

You went straight to Danang?

Yes. We came in at night.

Someone else told me--see if this rings a bell--one of the docs told me he arrived at night.

It was spooky.

He said when he looked out, he saw fire fights going on.

Yep.

Did you see that?

I saw "artie" going off and everything. I had written a manuscript about that and I can remember just looking down and just saying, "Shit, you know, Lord, don't let me die now, you know. Give me a chance to get on the ground." It's just looking down there and seeing all these flashes and things going off. It was spooky.

You landed and they opened the door and were you met with this blast of humid--
Oh, yes. Geez, real hot.

What was that like?

I don't know. I can't remember what it felt like, and then I just remember just waiting in this like a big huge hangar for someone to finally come and tell me where the hell I supposed to go, and I ended up going on a truck to a chopper pad and waiting for a chopper to take me wherever the hell it was that I went.

So a Huey came and picked you up?

No, I don't think we went in a Huey; I think we went in a--no, I don't think it was a Huey. It was a big one, a Sea Night or Sea Stallion, a twin blade.

CH-46 was the big--

Yes. I know one was a Sea Night and one was a Sea Stallion--Sea Night. I can't remember.

So they dumped you on this fire base, Baldy?

I don't know if it was Baldy or Ross. I can't remember which one.

When you got there, was it still dark or was it daylight?

No, I think it was like the next day or something like that. It was light. They said go to the battalion aid station. So I went to the battalion aid station and everyone there seemed to be pretty nice. They seemed to be pretty warm and everything and they had steak. [Laughter] Yeah, steak. They had beer. I can't remember this first-class' name, but he was real nice. He was real, real nice. We went and sat out on top of one of the bunkers and you could see fire fights going out. That night, I guess NVA had infiltrated into the base, not where I was, anyway.

But then the next day, I think it was, that they told me to get on the chopper again and go over to this other place, and so I think that was Ross that I went to then.

That was your unit that you were assigned to at that point? Yes. That's right. Now I can see, because I had a picture of me. The fatigues I had on weren't jungles, but they were fatigues that I had worn, I guess, in field medical school or something like that. Yes. It's what I was wearing, and leather boots. It must have been stuff I had from field medical school.

So you didn't have your jungle boots yet?

No.

You didn't have your cammies or anything--you just had what you came with.

Yes.

Did you bring any luggage with you?

No. Just one piece.

Just that?

Just one piece. What did I have in it? I don't remember if I brought a sea bag also or not.

So you get to Ross, and what did it look like? Was it just hacked out of the jungle?

On top of a hill?

There was a lot mud when I was there. A lot of mud.

What season was it? What month was it?

August.

It must have been brutally hot there.

Yes. Well, the heat--having been in the desert, and I guess maybe I got acclimated somewhat to the heat.

A different kind.

Yes, there wasn't any rain or anything and it wasn't as humid.

You're going from the high desert to a sauna bath, essentially.

[Laughter] For some reason it didn't--I don't know, it didn't seem to ring a bell to me at that time. But I can remember getting some jungles and having them altered, and I remember they screwed them up because they cut them real short. They cut them down to about to here. So I couldn't wear my blousing garters, and I used to wear my blousing garters around my wrist. They couldn't get any boots for me because I have a small foot, size five. This doesn't sound right, I didn't think this was too nice of some of the corpsmen, there were a couple first-class there and they didn't go out into the bush or anything like that, they stayed in the rear and this one guy said, you know, "You'll be okay. You go out with the boots that you've got."

[Laughter]

These were the ones you came with?

Yeah.

The leathers?

Yeah. This was a young guy. He didn't know who I was, how old I was or anything like that. I just felt like, you know, smacking him right in the head. I didn't say anything. I looked around and I saw some of the RVNs and they had small feet. I'm saying, you know, what the hell, if they can have boots, I'll be goddamn, you've got to be able to find a pair of size five for me, too.

So you were looking for jungle boots with metal insoles for pungee [phonetic] stick kind of stuff? You didn't want to be wearing these crappy boots that--

Yes. No, you couldn't get any traction and they were heavy. Once they're wet, I mean, they just would never dry. You know, your feet would just, you know, swell up from immersion, too, because they were never dry. They would always be wet.

So you were supposed to get outfitted at this point with not only boots, but jungle fatigues and cammies, I guess, in the Marines.

We just called them jungles because they were the only ones that were wearing cammies at the time. The Army still had the browns. Well, maybe because later we worked with a group and they had tigers and cammies and brown and some s___ outfit or something. [Tape recorder turned off]

But still, it was a Navy battalion aid station or something, you know, it had to be. No, it wasn't a Marine unit. It was still Navy. Finally, I can't remember how I did it, I got some boots and I had my jungles, and then I was assigned to my company, 3d Battalion, Seventh Marines, 2d Platoon, I think it was.

Second Platoon?

I think so, yes.

Third Marines?

Well, no, 2d Platoon, Mike Company. So the company was M Company, or Mike, nickname Medivac Mike. Third Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division.

Did you draw other equipment at this point besides a weapon or a medical kit?

No. All that I'd gotten--which was like down the road where I went for them, but before I went down the road to my unit, I tried to get a 45 and they didn't have any. I tried to get emergency surgical kit and they didn't have any. Finally, one of the corpsmen had just come in, he gave me his 45, so it was just he gave me his. There wasn't any paper on it. I didn't know what the hell the service number was or anything on it, so I didn't draw anything from anyone. That was it.

So whatever medical equipment you had, you had to scrounge up?

Yes.

What did you finally end up scrounging up? I mean a corpsman is not a corpsman unless he's got his gear.

Well, I had whatever was in the Unit One. Whatever was in the Unit One.

What was normally in the Unit One?

Jesus, I don't even remember. I remember the morphine, I remember, because I took morphine.

Morphine?

Yes, and I put them in my pocket.

Hemostats?

Yes, and I can't remember what else. I remember I wanted to have a scalpel, but that only came with the emergency medical kits and I didn't get one.

So you didn't get a scalpel?

No. No.

Suture material?

That would have been, I think, in the emergency kit and I didn't--

You didn't have that either?

No.

Two-by-twos? Four-by-fours?

Yeah, yeah, that I had. Well, the next thing I went to get, I went to get bandoliers, pouches. I can't remember who told me, someone had mentioned it to me, so I went and got bandoliers and I put them together and I started two small battle dressings in each opening, so I was carrying maybe sixty battle dressings. Then I stuffed them in my pockets and I traded something to get a doggie jacket because--

A doggie jacket?

Yes.

What's that?

Well, the flak jackets that the Marines had were real heavy and just really--they just weren't good, so I traded to get an Army jacket--an Army flak jacket that had a higher collar on it and everything. So I got that.

When you got the bandoliers and the battle dressings and all of that, where did you get it from, do you remember? Did you have to trade for that stuff, too?

No, I think when the Marines were getting ammunition. I don't remember. But I remember the bandoliers were around, that ammunition came in, because I remember someone say, "You're going to need a lot of battle dressings. Put them in the bandoliers," so that's what I remember doing.

I know this is probably true of other corpsmen who went over there, you went over to relieve another corpsman, probably, and if there was any overlap time, the corpsman would tell you, "Hey, this is what you need. This is what I had to use. This is what you need." Or did you just kind of fall into it?

No, just one of those, you know, fell-into-it-type things and tried to get--it was strange, because when I left the first place I was on before I went with the unit, the corpsmen at the other place just weren't that comfortable. I mean, they didn't want to talk to any newbies. Just one guy that gave me his 45 was pretty nice. The rest of them said, "Well, you'll find out," and this and that, and then the ones that hadn't been in bush were just, you know, they didn't seem to care, you know. They were counting off their days and, you know, drinking their booze and that was it.

So it wasn't what you'd call unit cohesion?

No. Not at all. No.

You found the morale was pretty low, or nonexistent?

Well, it may have been with those people, but it wasn't with me. I mean, towards me, either, you know. They were in battalion aid station doing what they were doing and I knew where I was going. I felt I had something to do over there.

Were the docs in the battalion aid station?

Yeah. They weren't as nice as the first place I had been in, where I stayed a couple of days. No one seemed to care.

They just ignored you, essentially? Just ignored you?

Pretty much so. Yes. I remember I tried to find a place to sleep one night and I couldn't find anyplace to sleep. I don't know if it was a surgery place that they had or something. Anyway, I just took a cot that was stacked up there, took it and slept on that.

So it wasn't exactly a welcoming kind of group at all.

No.

It was, "Hey, you're here and so what. Stay out of our way"?

Yes. They were counting their time. I remember they had little miniature refrigerators and big stereo systems. People playing tape recorders. Big tape recorders, you know, with the big tape decks on there. People playing that. I remember filling sandbags.

You say you had a job to do. Were you wondering when you were going to get started doing your job?

Yeah. Yeah. I just wanted to get the hell out of there. I just wanted to get in the bush where, you know, people would let me do what I've got to do.

So how long were you here before that happened?

Just a few days. A few days too long. Again, my attitude was, you know, I want to go do something and I want to help people. Most of the people there, if they were lifers, they were just getting their ticket punched. You know, fine, that's their business. They didn't know me from Adam. Maybe they thought I was just, you know, another E4 that's here. Hey--

So at some point, a couple of days down the road, something changed. How did you get into your role as a corpsman? What happened? Did you get orders?

No, they just told me, "Hey, you know, that's who you go with. Go down there," and so I did.

Where was "down there"?

Like down the hill or something. I guess the unit had just come back in and they were getting ready to go back out the next day. So they told me I was assigned to this unit.

A rifle company?

Yeah. A platoon. So I just went down. I asked them, I guess, where the platoon was. There was a staff sergeant and there was a platoon commander. I went in, I met him and I just looked around and just sat down and started checking my gear. Guys were coming in. I had my medical insignia and they started introducing themselves. You know, "How you doing, Doc?" This and that and the other thing.

I treated a couple guys right there. I treated them for--maybe it was jungle rot. Probably jungle rot. I started scrubbing and using, not mecurichrome, whatever we had. I can't remember. I had an extra pair of socks and I was able to get some plastic bags. I got--the radio man gave

me, because he had an extra battery or something, or he must have broken the battery out and he had a plastic bag--this heavy plastic bag, so I put the pair of socks I had already in plastic bags into the big plastic bag because I wanted to keep one pair of dry socks. So I remembered that. The next morning, we just took off.

You didn't know particularly--I guess most of the grunts didn't know what the plan was. You were just going out, is that it? I mean, was it supposed to be a search-and-destroy mission? What was it supposed to be, a scouting mission, or what? Did you know at that time?

No. No. It wasn't up to me to know.

You just go along and do what you have to do?
Yes.

Was there a lieutenant in charge of this platoon?

No. No, I was fortunate. I didn't work with an officer. We had a staff sergeant. We went through three staff sergeants, platoon commanders, but they'd all been on their second tours, so the ranking man was a staff sergeant. I think we had just one sergeant. I was probably the third ranking man and the rest were lance corporals and PFCs.

How many guys in the platoon?

Well, it wasn't a full platoon. There were twenty-eight Marines and myself. So we were pretty small.

Do you remember the first day you went off with them? Was there anything memorable about that? You said, "Hey, I'm finally doing what I'm supposed to be doing." Did that cross your mind?

Well, yeah. It was wild, because we were going and I didn't know how long we were going to stay out. I mean, I had no idea what the operation was like or what was going on. We started out and then we were an escort for some Popular Forces, some PFs.

Popular Forces were indigenous--what were they? Like [unclear]?

No, they weren't [unclear].

And they weren't RVNs either?

Just--

Militia?

Yeah, kind of. Right there I said, you know, this whole thing sucks. Because we came to an opening and then there was this open field and some rice paddies and stuff and we got on line. Meanwhile, the PFs went all the way around, staying in the tree line, and we got on line going right across the opening and it wasn't too smart. And I'm saying, "What the hell are doing over here? What are we doing?" You know, I mean, here we are right out in the open and the other suckers, you know--

They knew better. The other guys knew better.

Well, they knew something we didn't and maybe that was the Marines' M.O., you know. They say, "Hey, you know, you get on line and you get killed." The other people, the indigenous people, they stay safe, you know, so you people risk your ass. It just started shaking me up right there. I mean, I just couldn't make heads or tails of it.

This was the first day?

Yep. I don't know what I was carrying, maybe forty pounds on my back, and I remember the mud just sucking me right down, every step I'd take. I'd just hear my foot go "pppfttt." And then trying to get my foot out of the mud. I can just about remember, like probably grabbing a leg with both hands, trying to get it up. It would finally pop out. And then falling in the mud and having this radioman, Cloud, turn around and right there his hand would be every time. He'd grab me and try to pull me up.

A mistake that I think was occurring at that time was I went to FMF maybe five months before, so I wasn't humping. I had five months of really being kind of logy [phonetic], kind of lax, when the Marines, if they had gotten in country the same time I did, they had been humping for two weeks at Pendleton in staging so they could get in shape for that.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

You know, having finished field med school five months before, I wasn't in the kind of shape I should have been to start humping like that. I remember I just got so sore. Then I just kind of like went numb to everything. I just didn't feel anything after that. You get to that point, you go beyond and you just stay numb.

You say you had forty pounds. Essentially you had an Alice pack or something on?
Alice pack, I don't--

You know, like a big knapsack, kind of.
Yeah. You didn't have a frame in it or anything.

Medical gear. You had your 45, which isn't light.
Yeah. Four canteens.

Four canteens. You didn't have a rifle, though?
No. It wasn't my job. A pistol. I had heard that some corpsmen got to be real grunts and were carrying shotguns, M16s, you know, anything. If I was going to carry anything, it would be more battle dressings. That wasn't my function to be a grunt.

It probably would have been too much for you, anyway, at that point. If you were carrying forty pounds of anything else and carrying a rifle, you couldn't have done it even if you had the inclination to do it.

Yes. But, again, the Marines' job, they were riflemen and our job was corpsmen, and it's just two different things. If someone went down, you could pick up a rifle and use it, but that wasn't my mission. It just wasn't. That's not something that I wanted to do. In fact, the 45 was for me. It came to the point where I did. I had it like this at night and it was to blow my brains out, because I wouldn't be captured.

So this is your inauguration. This is your first day on the job, and you say to yourself, "This is not what I had in mind."

Well, I don't know what I had in mind. I thought that the people there were going to be fighting or wanted to defend themselves or their land or something, and this just totally blew me right away.

The facts that these--

That the PFs--

Just took off.

Yeah. They had a lot of cover and we didn't. After we finally got to a point, there was a major, a second lieutenant, a Spec 4, and a Marine gunny sergeant--

So you had Army mixed with Marines here?

Yeah. This was a small--I don't know who the hell they were. The Marine, I believe had on tiger--camouflage in a tiger pattern. I don't know who the hell they were, some special operations group or something. I remember the major had a patch that said Ranger on it and he was carrying the radio. That was the weird thing. I couldn't understand why the hell the major, the ranking person, would be carrying the radio.

We got a bunch of civilians, and I don't know if the PFs were supposed to escort them or what. We ended up leaving the people after a while, but I treated my first people and it happened to be a mamasan. I don't know how old she was. I don't even think she was as old as I was, but she was pretty beat up and she had been hit with fleshettes, I believe. I think some of the ordnance that the Air Force had were these bombs that would burst open and throw out these darts, and I think they were called fleshettes. This lady had been hit all over in the legs and she was all pussey and all messed up.

I don't remember how we got our ponchos. It started raining. Maybe I used my poncho, or someone, but I asked for the poncho to be set up. I can't remember if some of the people were holding it or what. I had this one mamasan come in and I tried to clean her up as best I could, and some other people, and I remember I got real pissed at one of these PFs. He did something and it really, really pissed me off, like he wouldn't help the lady or something, and it just really, really, really got to me and I started getting real angry. The word "angry" doesn't mean anything to me, but I started to get violent inside. He did something and it just disgusted me. I don't remember now what it was.

You said you were trying to clean her up. You didn't really have that much medical equipment to do--she sounded like she needed a lot of work.

Well, I had gauze and I had battle dressings. I don't remember what else I had that I could, you know, use on her. I just tried to clean her up as best I could, and I guess they were going to be taken somewhere, probably to some medical facility and then be taken to a refugee camp or something. That's what I guess, because we were working--by then I guess we had gotten into a free fire zone, so what happened, I'm not sure what days, a Bronco would come in, an aircraft. We were in the Queson Mountains--I guess it was the Queson Valley.

The northern part? North Central?

Well, I was up in I-Corps up near An Hua. I didn't know it at the time. I do now, after looking at the maps and things. It was southwest of Danang, maybe thirty miles or so in the valley, in the mountains called Queson Mountains. The Marines had been working that area for probably four years anyway, on and off, and that was designated then as a free fire zone.

Anything that moved was eligible?

Yeah. They flew a Bronco down. They were dropping leaflets. I guess they had done that before. I remember when the Bronco came over, they were broadcasting Vietnamese, I guess telling the people to get the hell out of the area or something like that.

So these were really the first civilians that you had come in contact with, and they were hurt and needed help.

Yeah.

How many were there altogether, would you say? Just a handful?

No, there were quite a few. I don't remember how many. I remember giving the mamasan a cigarette to smoke, and I remember it was raining. Then this group that came out, I don't know who the hell they were, but then I guess the PFs were supposed to maintain security for them and we just kept on going, so I'm not sure whatever happened.

We just had different objectives every day to go to wherever the hell it was we were going to. I don't know.

You weren't privy to what the strategy was. It seemed kind of aimless wandering through the jungles or the mountains or whatever?

Yeah. At night when we set in, my responsibility to be what they called the CP group, the command group. That was a platoon sergeant, the right guide, and I'm not sure what the hell that function was, and myself. We would have a radio watch. I can't remember, I think we had three radios altogether between us. We would set out our perimeter, and two parts of that perimeter would have a radio, plus our radio.

I remember this clear. My function, and we would do this in two-hour shifts, two on and four off, but it didn't last that long because we were moving early in the morning, but when I had my watch, my function was to call the other radios. We were Charlie Papa. One radio was Charlie Papa One, the other was Charlie Papa Two. What we would say would be to make sure that they were still secure and that we hadn't been infiltrated by the NVA, we'd give a time check and we'd say, "Charlie Papa One, this is Charlie Papa, time is--" and give the time, and, "If you read me, if you hear me, click your handset twice." Click, click. So we wouldn't compromise by using any voice command. They wouldn't use a voice command. Just the CP group would, and we'd be some distance away from them. I'm not sure how far out they set. I don't think it was all that far, certainly not 100 meters. Maybe thirty meters or something like that where they would lay in for the night. So that's what we'd do.

What did you do for chow--sea rats?

Yes. Then every few days we'd go to a spot and get resupplied.

A drop zone or something?

No, it was just a hill, and a chopper would come in and bring us stuff. We were humping somewhere and someone spotted some people, so most of the unit stopped and sent a--I guess it was a fire team to go pick the people or to find out who they were, so I said, "Let me go along with them." I don't know why the hell I went along with them for. I guess I wanted to find out what was going on. I'm doing this, you know, I'm saying, you know, "What the hell, man? You must be goofy. Why do you keep wanting to do all these things?"

But I was afraid that we might be ambushed, and I was afraid that if the fire team was going out to kind of recon the people, I didn't want to have them out there without having a corpsman there. Now, in retrospect, I don't think that made a lot of sense, but it did at that time.

Anyway, what we found were four people and they were living attached to this huge boulder. They had put up like a lean-to. It was a mamasan and a papasan and two boysans, and they were just beat up to hell. I'm almost certain they weren't as old as me, but they just looked--they were ragged. They were just ragged.

They had been injured or they were starving or--

Well, they were pretty beat up. I remember the youngest boy--the oldest one was probably around fourteen. It's the one that's in that picture that I took. The younger boy, his stomach was bloated and he was malnourished. I remember his eyes were yellowed. He was jaundiced. I wanted to clean him up. I remember taking my helmet off and taking the liner out so I just had the pot, and one of the Marines finally got him to get water and I got him over. I didn't have soap because I didn't carry soap, but I had something, PhisoHex or something I must have had to clean him with. I got him over and he didn't want to do anything. I was smoking at the time and I remember giving him a cigarette. Anyway, he came over. Kids. So, I tried to clean him up as best I could and I don't really remember why I wanted to clean him up other than the fact that, you know, kids should be clean. You know, even though they get dirty, they should get clean. I don't know why, it just got to me that much that I just wanted to see him clean.

Anyway, we got the people and we got in radio contact with someone, and they said that they were going to pick the people up. So we had to blindfold them. I guess mamasan and papasan, their hands were tied and everything. The kids were blindfolded. We went up on some hill and waited for the chopper to come in and pick them up. They were supposed to go to a refugee camp or something.

What was the blindfolding for? They weren't supposed to see where they were going?

I guess that, and I guess they didn't want them to know how many of us there were. Kind of goofy.

There was some suspicion that they may-- [Tape recorder turned off]

You say some of the Marines in your platoon just showed some inclination to shoot these people?

Well, yes. They were in the free fire zone. I can't remember who, but I'm almost certain I remember somebody saying, "Let's recon by fire," or something like that as opposed to going to where they were. There were a fairer ways away, maybe 70, 80 meters away or something like that, and they shouldn't have been there. I mean, they didn't know that, you know. I remember thinking after--or maybe while I was there, that these people didn't want us there. What the hell we were there for, I had no idea. These people, although they were living like some people in

this country were living a couple hundred years ago, they were happy. They didn't want to be bothered, and that's just the way it was. You know, just leave them alone. It was just strange. They had chickens or something, too, and I don't remember what happened with them. I don't know. I don't remember.

What you've talked about up till now, have you, in a sense, conglomerated patrols, or was this the very first one you were on?

Well, the first one was the last one. I don't know how many days we were out, twenty days or something like that. The only reason that we got back in was because we didn't have too many of us left. So they pulled us in to go to an in-country R&R so that we could get regrouped and get more strength in the unit.

When you ran across these people in the free fire zone, this was the very first patrol?

Yes.

I don't want to call it--it's not really a patrol. What is it? It's a mission?

Yes. Well, what I think what we ended up--what we were, I believe, we were just bait. It's just that simple. Bait. We were just like a worm on a hook just waiting to be hit and that was it.

There was no real reason to be out there? Just wandering around?

Yeah, just wandering around. I don't remember how many fire fights. We'd come under snipers. I remember always, maybe after the second day or something like that, just feeling--knowing that Charlie was looking at us and just wondering when the hell are we going to open up, because I would feel more comfortable once that would happen. All the tension would be gone.

We were going to wherever it was we were going one day, and someone spotted--it had to be our point that spotted a movement, a couple of NVA, and so a fire fight started. I remember they called for a blooper man.

What?

A blooper. M79. Grenade launcher. And so he's plopping up into the rocks and things, and every so often this person would be sighted again in a different area, some NVA up there. It sounds so funny. It was funny at the time. I mean, what happened was they called for the gun.

The grenade launcher?

Well, no, the machine gun.

M60?

Yeah. I think it was Benny that was on the gun at that time. He opened up and it was like he locked on. It wasn't a burst. It just locked right on, and there were these rocks and a tree back here and he actually shot the tree, cut the tree down, so the tree fell. And right after that, the guy had a white hankie or something, and we see this hankie come up between the rocks like this. Then "Chu hoy. Chu hoy." I remember him saying, "Chu hoy." He was giving up. So it took a hell of a long time for this guy to come down out of the rocks, and I remember the

Marines cursing him, you know. "Leday, leday, motherfucker, leday. Come on down, come on down." Anyway, there were two of them. We only found the one. I don't know if they found blood trails and found the other guy or what.

But we didn't make our objective for that night. Radio contact and told them we had a prisoner and we had to stay where we were, which we ended up staying in his area where he lived.

So he was VC, then?

No, he was NVA. Now, I don't know what his function was. I don't know if he was a spy. I don't know what the hell he was--

How could you tell whether he was NVA or VC? How did you know? Was there any way of telling?

He had a uniform. He had a brown uniform. His hootch--one thing he had, and he was down like in a valley and going up the side of the mountain, he had taken bamboo, cut it lengthwise and had it overlapping all the way up. At the base he had this huge jug, so in the morning all the dew would fall into the bamboo and go all the way. The guy had fresh water right there. He had like a cave right into the side of the mountain and it was like under this huge boulder, dug right in, and this would be the boulder on top, so I mean, it could have taken a direct hit and maybe he would get a headache, that was all. I mean, you never would have got the guy. It was just way in there. I know, I slept there.

Then he had part of a rock that was flat. I don't know if he had flattened it or what, but that's where he slept. Then there was a spot underneath it that you could go to like a bomb shelter, and so we stayed there for the night. It was Sergeant Shed [phonetic] who--because Shed and I shared our shelter halves.

S-H-E-A-D?

Or S-H-E-D, something like that, yes.

I knew a guy whose name was Shead. He was Air Force, worked with me in the clinic.

We used to call him Sergeant Shit. [Laughter] He was nice. He was good people. In fact, nights before that, we got caught in some real messy weather and used our shelter halves together for a tent. It's weird, because I can't remember some things, it seems like all blurred together, but I remember the next day, we didn't go wherever it was we were supposed to go. Our mission was changed and we were to go back on the hill to bring the prisoner, so we went back on the hill. I'm trying to remember. A lot of stuff.

Anyway, we went back and we stayed overnight on that hill, and Sergeant Shed put our shelter heads together, and we had this NVA with us, looked like a real old guy, wasn't real young. He had pictures he showed us of his family, I guess it was, and he seemed to be real pleasant.

[Long pause] During that day, too, we had given him seas and we let him drink our water and all this stuff. There were some casings from some artillery shells. There was a 105 on this one hill and there weren't a lot of people, just the 105 and I don't know if they moved it by helicopter or what, but they had a 105 and a 50-caliber machine gun that they used as a spotter for the 105 recoilers. Anyway, we set up our tent and everything and found some comm wire. Sergeant Shed and I were going to our shelter halves again. He just wanted to what he had done

the night before, was just wrist to wrist with this NVA. So I said, "Hell, man, no way. I'm going to be in there tonight with you."

So I found this comm wire and I lashed his feet together and I lashed his hands together. I had him stretched out like this. I had my 45 out, and I went to sleep. During the night, I heard this moaning and everything. I woke up, Sergeant Shed is snoring away like this, and the guy was awake. I finally understood that he wanted to go to the john, so I didn't know what to do. I guess I untied his hands first and helped him up and everything, and he was hobbling around like that, he went to take a leak, and I'm looking out across the valley, and I'm saying, "Geez, that's it. Tonight I'm going to die because this guy set us up and he's going to be signalling his comrades out there somehow. I don't know how." But anyway, all these weird things going through my mind. This guy is taking a leak, and I'm saying, "How the hell can anyone piss so long?" So this must be the signal. You know, someone sees him or something.

Then I started laughing. Meanwhile, I got my 45 out and I'm ready to blow his brains out. It finally dawned on me that this guy had been eating all our chow. I mean, we offered it to him. I mean, the Marines didn't beat him up or treat him badly or anything like that. It finally dawned on me that this guy had been drinking all our water all day long and he didn't get a chance to go to the john, so here he's just peeing up a storm. But I didn't know at the time what the hell was going on. I thought we were going to get hit. So the next day a chopper came and they took him away. We continued working wherever we were working in the area.

Then it was October 16th and we lost the trail that day. It just stopped. I remember taking my pack and putting it up real high and laying it against some vegetation. I looked down and there was a hill. We had put out air panels, just sheets of plastic--not plastic, like plastic.

Styrofoam?

No, real light. You could roll them up. Maybe they were plastic. More like a canvas material-type thing that we'd just lay out. A couple of other people were looking for the trail, and I was just trying to rest my pack and everything. I looked up and I saw a helicopter and I saw some smoke come down, so I asked the platoon sergeant, I said, "What's going on here?"

He said, "What is it, Doc?"

I said, "There's a chopper up there."

So he looked up and they were marking our position, so he got on the radio. He's trying to get on the frequency of the chopper. Meanwhile, there's two more, so there's three and they're Cobras, three Cobras circling up here. I'm against this vegetation and I'm looking, and I'm looking up, and as soon as the nose of things drop, they're going to bring pee on us. Shit, I'm just going this way. I'm just going to fall over backwards and go down the hill. You know, I don't want to get blown away by our own people.

Finally, they couldn't contact the choppers, but they were able to contact some people somewhere on another hill that relayed we were friendly. We were waving, doing everything. Evidently we got their attention, you know, they marked us, but they didn't know that we were friendly. So somewhere someone didn't know where we were and that we were the good guys.

We found the trail and that started off the day. Then we had a fire fight. An NVA officer was killed, so we stopped and he stayed at his hootch, went through some papers, got some papers and some pictures, other stuff, and we ate chow and everything. There was like divvy time, you know, did you want to keep this, did you want to keep that?

Meanwhile, I had gotten two more canteens and I was carrying six canteens, four American and two NVA canteens, and I wore those.

Where were you filling them?

Just in a stream. We didn't get any fresh water or anything like that. We had heard stories about the Army getting hot meals and things like that. The only thing that we got hot was what we cooked with C4. That was it. Or a heat [unclear]. We didn't get any exotic meals out there or anything like that. It wasn't like the Army.

I'm mixed up on other things that had happened before this, but then that day was--you know, we just got all together again. We crossed the stream, a blue line.

Blue line?

Yes. It would be a stream.

That's what you called a stream?

Yeah, a blue line. So we crossed that, and we were going up. We were in triple canopy. We were just going wherever the hell the trail was going. I started feeling real weird, and I stopped. I put my pack up high, and I was leaning against a rock or boulder there. I was walking thirteenth, behind a radioman, Cloud, and I remember him saying, "Come on, Doc, you know, spread out." Something just didn't feel right to me. I just didn't feel right. I just felt real spooky. I remember I heard one shot go, and it was when the ambush was sprung. I remember dropping my pack and running, and I remember somebody saying, "Give Doc a base of fire," and I just started running.

So you heard this ambush under way and you're running toward where that noise is coming from? You were seventeenth? You were in the back?

I was thirteenth. It was really spooky. Yes, I just figured, hey, the hell, all the superstitions--if I'm going to get blown away, I'm going to get blown away, you know.

So there's a point man out there and you're walking through the woods and you hear one shot and then all hell breaks loose at that point?

I don't know. I didn't hear anything after that. I mean, that's all I heard. I just remember the one round. After that, I was, just, you know, my focus was just doing what I was supposed to be doing. I remember going up and getting to--climbing up some rocks and things and getting up on a trail. There was a Marine down there, and I remember Leister [phonetic] was there. He was our platoon commander. And Beatty [phonetic]. I remember getting up there. [Tape recorder turned off]

You say you looked down and you saw a Marine.

Yes.

Was he hit?

Yes. He was down. I remember cutting his jacket and opening up his flak jacket and then getting that off. Beatty was helping me. I found a hole on his side and I covered that, and then I was trying to feel around on the back and on his side to find an exit hole, and I couldn't find an exit hole. I remember he started gurgling, so I started giving him mouth-to-mouth.

Then he died. So he was just looking at me, and I remember, I guess, trying to talk to him or afterwards, "Don't die on me," and I started cursing and I cursed the Navy because I

never--I didn't have a K-bar and I didn't have a scalpel, so I never had a chance to do a trach on him, and I might have been able to save him. I didn't have anything to cut with, so he died. I remember taking my fingers and pulling his eyelids down. I don't remember if I helped get him off the dike or where we were or what, and then I jumped down and we started getting casualties.

I don't remember if it was one of the other radiomen that got hit. He came down and I worked on him. I had people staged in an area down here where there were rocks and everything. I had somebody start screaming and came down. Something must have hit near his head or something, anyway, it screwed up his hearing and he couldn't stand any sound, so I put some battle dressings on his ears and wrapped him with an ACE wrap and I guess maybe cravats, too, that I used to try to seal off as much noise as I could from him, because any noise, he just start screaming like hell. Different people were getting hit and coming down.

They would come down to where you were, if they could crawl?

Yeah. I heard somebody say Camerme [phonetic] was hit in the head.

Who was?

A guy by the name of Camerme. It was really strange because like this would be the trail here, and Benny, our machine gunners, couldn't put the gun up here. He had his feet on my shoulders and around my head, and he couldn't put the gun up on the trail. I was smoking a cigarette and they said this guy had been hit in the head, so I went. I went up on top of the trail, and the Marine, I remember how he was. When I got up there, anyway, he was like sitting down, or I sat him down. I don't remember. I remember standing over him and looking through his hair and I couldn't find any blood, so I reached in my pocket and I pulled out some scissors and I started cutting. I kept looking and I didn't find any blood.

Cutting his hair?

Yeah. I don't know what made me think. Finally, I turned his head up and I looked at him and he just looked right through me. Something must have hit near his ear or something. He was in shock, bad. He didn't know what the hell was going on. So I got him down. I remember lighting up a cigarette for him and putting it in his fingers. I don't remember how many people were down there by then. I went down later to check on the people and the cigarette had burned all the way, just a huge long ash, had burned all the way through, had been burnt through to the filter and everything. He was still [unclear].

I remember somebody saying Red got hit in the back, in the spine, so I went up and went back up on the trail. The crazy thing was, I was told later, that the shit was hitting all along the trail and I was standing--I was just standing up there, just standing. By rights, I should have been killed right then, you know. When I went up again, this guy Red was this way, so I went up and I started crawling, and I'm thinking, you know, well, I can get to him and what I just have to do is just put him on top of me and just work my way back to where I could get down to the rocks and everything where the other people were. So I started working my way down and he started coming this way. I didn't know how bad he was. No one knew. So I got him down on the rocks and other people.

I remember the radio going and someone getting in touch with--we were always in an interlocking grid support, so I guess there was 155s and 175s that, when the position was reported, that we could get support from those two areas. But the NVA were so close that we'd have been killed, too, in the area we were in, it was so thick anyway that, you know, the rounds

probably would have gone off before they ever got down anyway. Anyway, we just told them you know, "Fuck, don't fire. You're going to kill us, too."

We were almost out of ammunition. For some reason, they broke contact. And about three months later--and I think I know why--about three months later, I was in the hospital in Long Beach and I saw in the *Stars and Stripes* that another unit had uncovered the largest underground complex in the Queson Mountains, and I think that we were close to it and that if we had gotten overrun, they would have sent in a REAC [phonetic] force. That's when we were out there for--bait--and probably would have found the complex that they found a few months later, and I think that's what saved our life. I don't know.

Saved your life because they broke off contact because they didn't want you to find--

That's what I think, yeah. That's what I think, because earlier we had had that fire fight and we had killed an officer, and I don't know how that all related to that complex. I don't know. It's just, you know, it's just what I think happened.

But we finally were able to get everyone together and start humping down to where we could get an open area. So we came down the side and into a flood area and called the chopper. Well, also called the Zoomies [phonetic].

What's a Zoomie?

The jets. So the "artie" opened up. Meanwhile, we finally got down. When we were pulling out, I mean, we had dead and wounded and they were being carried on ponchos. We had walking wounded. I remember carrying gear and I had the walking wounded hand to shoulder type and hand to belt, whatever they could reach.

[Begin Tape 2, Side 1; interview begins 13 minutes into the beginning of the tape]

They had some NVA go into a cave and I remember them saying, "They're going to FRAG the cave," so we were hoping to get some prisoners rather than to, you know, just to have KAA. They FRAG'ed the cave and they had one confirmed kill and they got a prisoner. So they, on the radio, said, "Doc, this guy's all splattered with blood. What do we do?"

I told them where I was, said, "Bring him in and undress him and I'll be right there."

This is the NVA?

Yes. So they brought this guy in. I remember I was smoking. I smoked a lot. I was smoking a cigarette. The Marines brought him, and the guy is splattered with blood and he's got shorts on. So I just took my 45 and took the safety off, started walking across to where he was. I was holding it at arm's length. I walked up and the guy didn't blink an eye. They Marines just looked at me like I had, you know, finally flipped out. My function was to treat people, it wasn't to shoot people, and my job wasn't to do what a Marine does, whatever that is, but if I asked them to undress him, then that's exactly what I wanted. So I put the 45 to the guy's head and I took his shorts and I looked inside. I didn't know if he was booby-trapped or not. That's why I wanted him undressed.

I checked him over and everything, and he hadn't been hit at all. The blood was from whoever was with him. So I remember giving him a cigarette and everything. I guess they lashed his wrists together. We called whoever the hell they called and I guess they sent--they were going to send some--we had to meet some people at a crossroads or something. They were

supposed to send an armored personnel carrier or something to get the people out and to take the prisoner, so we went, and something got mixed up. We were late or I don't remember what the hell happened, I just remember finally they came and they took the people away and they took the prisoner away.

We stayed a couple more days and we got word that we were going to be taken to an R&R center in country, a place called Stack Arms.

Stack Arms?

Yes. Where you literally stack your arms, stack your weapons. So that was it. When we went there, they literally locked us in, took our weapons, locked us in. I had been hurt and picked up some shrapnel on the 16th. I wasn't hit bad, but I had hurt myself--or I got hurt.

This was during the ambush?

Yeah. I wouldn't get Medivaced and I was getting bad. I was getting where I could hardly walk.

Was this your back injury?

If they hadn't pulled us out, I was on the verge of getting myself out, because I was ready to start taking my own morphine and I wouldn't jeopardize being loaded out there. I wouldn't jeopardize anyone else. Fortunately, they pulled us out. So when I went to the R&R is when I went to sick call there and the corpsman there told me, he says, "Jesus. You gotta go to--" I was running a temperature. I was emaciated. I don't know what else he saw, maybe my eyes had been discolored and everything, I don't know, but he said, "Finish your R&R. It's only two days. But then when you go back, get your records and go to the hospital." So that was it for me.

Which hospital did you go to?

NSA Danang. It was wild. When I left my unit, I was choppered, and I got choppered to a dental dispensary and I had to hitchhike. It was just a crazy thing, you know? And they wouldn't admit me because I was ambulatory and it was on a weekend. They didn't have a place for me to sleep, so they said, so I was in a barracks above the POWs, and the only thing I could find to sleep on was a cot. I mean, it was crazy. It really was. I was just flipping out.

In fact, when we were going in from the bush to be taken to Stack Arms, I started losing it. Some kids were running out to us with soda, wanting to sell us soda. We were all exhausted. There were some of us, besides myself, that had been hurt about five days before in the ambush, and were just probably just going on pride. There was an officer somewhere around, and I remember starting screaming at the kids and screaming for an officer and cursing out the Marine Corps and everything because they let these people sell the soda back to us. They stole it from us and then they wanted to sell it back to us, and here we hadn't had anything like that in I don't know how long. I just wanted to start killing people.

How long had you been out in the bush now? This was your first time out in the bush and it was essentially your last time out in the bush?

Yeah, maybe seventeen days or something like that.

So this was seventeen days of hell out there, pretty much. You saw everything anybody could see in a war out there in seventeen days. You had gotten hurt and seen

other people get hurt, you were in pretty bad shape physically, you were malnourished and injured, back-injured, shrapnel. So where did you go from there?

They finally put me in the hospital.

In Danang?

I had thought it was my back and what I thought--I didn't realize I had hurt myself. I thought that I had--see, I had nephritis as a kid, so I thought that my kidneys had been hurt somehow. They did a work-up and they said it wasn't my kidneys, but that I had parasites. So I had intestinal parasites, so they treated me for that. They cleared that up and then I contracted--I must have had it, it must have just been dormant, [unclear] malaria. [Laughter] I was in the hospital. So I was lucky, though. There were guys that had to be packed in ice and everything, but I was nowhere near that level.

I lost a couple of days--I don't remember, I guess I just don't know what happened. I remember I had tried to get my mail, and I guess a chaplain came by or something and I asked him for mail. I don't remember days, and then I remember having an IV, because I remember they had my arm on a board. They had me strapped on a board. I don't remember stuff. And then I remember looking up one day and seeing a corpsman with two packets of blood, and a chaplain coming down, and I didn't know they were coming to my bed. I looked up, and as they are getting closer, then I realized that, shit, they're probably coming here, you know. I couldn't really remember stuff and I didn't know what happened to me and I says, "Ah, shit, man, I can't die in the hospital. Just get me the fuck out of here and send me back to the bush, you know. I can't do this shit."

I found out that the chaplain was there to help me get my mail. I guess he had some mail or something. He had gotten it for me or something. I remember I zonked out again. But I've got a picture on my 30th birthday, getting blood. I'm sitting in a hospital bed.

Then I remember still complaining about my back and everything, and finally they sent me over and they did a GI series on me and I remember the stuff--the corpsman told me, he says, "Doc, it's just going to be chalky and everything," and I couldn't keep anything down. It was just all chalky and everything. Then they sent me over to get my back X-rayed, and they X-rayed my back, and I remember the surgeon over there putting "Return to CONUS for disability discharge." [Laughter]

What did they find in there?

Oh, they found [unclear], I think is what it was, and I don't know what else.

Disk problems?

Yes.

You fell. I remember you told me one time, you fell down an embankment or something, right? With your pack on or something?

Yes. My knees were screwed up. I just--I didn't want to go home. I just--

You felt like you hadn't finished your job? Is that what it was?

It wasn't right, you know.

You hadn't done your year? Is that it? You felt that you hadn't done your time?

No. I hadn't done my job. I mean, you know, I still had two arms and two legs and a mind, so there was really no reason to send me back. I mean, you know, those Marines weren't anybody's but mine, and it was up to me to stay with them and take care of them. You just don't leave. You know?

So in those seventeen days you were out there, you got pretty close to these guys. I mean, that's what you were there for. You were there to take care of those guys and you got close to them and then you felt like you were--

Well, I never thought I did. I never thought I would. I thought, you know, being older and everything, that I'd be able to be objective and be detached and everything, and it didn't work that way. It just didn't at all. It didn't. The first day, I just got so close and cared so much about the people. They were like my little brothers. Shit, I was the oldest guy there. You just don't leave, that's all. I mean, if I had been blown away, then it's a different story, but I wasn't blown away. So--

In the years since then, have you ever felt any differently about it or do you still feel the same way now as you did then?

Same way.

Did you ever see any of these guys again?

No. I still see them in my mind. I still--

[End of recording]